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GRAM

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NO.

TO : Department of State

INFO: BEIRUT, JIDDA, RAWALPINDI, Amconsuls TABRIZ, KHORRAMSHAHR

FROM : Amembassy TEHRAN

SUBJECT: Selecting a New Leader for Shi'ite Islam

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Summary

The position of "Pishva" or leader of the Shi'ite sect of Islam became vacant on June 1st upon the death of Ayatollah Hakim, and the GOI is attempting to have a religious leader who is resident in Iran and not opposed to the Shah's rule, chosen to take his place.

GOI efforts in support of two leading Iranian Shi'ite divines, Ayatollah Shariat-Maderi and Ayatollah Khonsari, have been counter-productive since its activities have generated suspicion among the Ulema, or religious leaders, who traditionally distrust the government and resent its interference in religious matters. The leading contender for the leadership among the faithful is Ayatollah Khomeini, who commands considerable respect and popularity in the bazaars of Iran. However, his residence in Iraq and his firm opposition to the Shah make him totally unacceptable to the GOI which, in turn, virtually precludes his becoming the new Pishva. The selection of a new leader is adversely affecting the already strained relations between Iran and Iraq. Iran, as the center of world Shi'ism, claims the right to veto the selection of a leader it finds unacceptable; Iraq would favor the selection of Khomeini, due in large measure to his antipathy toward the Shah. Because of the different attitudes and goals of the governments, it is likely the position of Pishva will remain vacant for some time.

Ayatollah* Seyed Mohsen HAKIM, the spiritual leader of the world's 70 million Shi'ite Muslims, died on June 1 in Baghdad, at the age of

*Title given to leading Shi'ite clerics.

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84. The choice of a pishva to succeed Hakim immediately became a prime topic of concern in Iran, where 92% of its 29 million inhabitants are adherents of Shi'ite Islam, making Iran the heart of the Shi'ite world. There is a very elastic and informal procedure for choosing a new Pishva. According to Shi'ite theology, there must be a consensus of the Ulema on who should be the new leader. Considering the inherently political nature of Shi'ite Islam, the consensus is hard to achieve and is usually won only by a man noted not only for his piety and learning but also for his political astuteness in balancing different factions and views. The procedure also makes it difficult for any government to control the choice since the opinions of all leading clerics must be considered, not merely the views of a formal body similar to the College of Cardinals in the Catholic Church.

The GOI is acutely aware of the considerable influence the Ulema still have in Iranian society and see the benefits to be gained from the selection of a Pishva who is resident in Iran and not critical of the Shah. Consequently, GOI efforts to influence the choice of a new Pishva have been quite intense.

The Shah declared three days of official mourning upon Hakim's death, and sent condolence messages to the Hakim's son in Baghdad and to two leading Iranian clerics. The Iranian charge in Baghdad called on Hakim's son to express the Shah's condolences and also attended Hakim's funeral. The Ayatollah was praised in the Persian press as a man of great learning and a light to the Shi'ite faith. These actions not only confirmed the Government's bona fides as a supporter of the faith but were also indicative of the esteem in which Hakim was held in Iran. This is all the more notable considering Hakim generally opposed the Shah's rule and, although of Iranian parentage, never visited Iran, even after being invited by the GOI.

The Government chose two leading Iranian Shi'ite divines as its candidates for Pishva of the faithful - Ayatollah Haj Seyed Kazem SHARIAT-MADERI of Qom and Ayatollah Haj Seyed Ahmad Mousavi KHONSARI of Tehran. Although the Government made no public announcement indicating its support for the two clerics, its preferences were obvious. The Shah's condolences were sent only to them and to no other Ayatollah of equal standing. Press reports speculating on the choice of the new Pishva have repeatedly played up both of the clerics, especially Shariat-Maderi. Both clerics had certain attributes which made them natural choices from the government's point of view. They are highly esteemed among the Ulema in Iran, they live in Iran -- and most important -- they are apolitical, thereby posing no threat to the Government.

Shariat-Maderi, the leading choice of the GOI, is 68 years old, an Azerbaijani, a teacher of Shi'ite law and tradition, an expert in trade and business, and generally recognized as a man of great piety and knowledge. His knowledge of Shi'ite commercial law has given him a broad following in the bazaars throughout Iran. He is also relatively liberal on questions of family law and education, thereby making him even more attractive to the Government. He

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does not, moreover, have the reputation of being a Government supporter. which would preclude him from being considered as Pishva, for the Ulama view with suspicion any religious leader with close ties to the Government. He is apolitical, believes in minimizing Shi'ite political activities and dedicates himself to furthering Shi'ite religious teachings.

The Government, however, faces a number of obstacles in its efforts to have Shariat-Maderi chosen as Pishva. Ulama opposed to his selection have seized on the telegram sent by the Shah, and the fact that he replied to it, as proof that he is a "lackey" of the Government and not deserving of the title of Mara-e-Taqlid - "Source of Imitation".

Opposition to his elevation exists from other quarters as well. The clandestine radios, realizing a Pishva who is not opposed to the Shah would reduce opportunities for encouraging dissidence among religious elements, view the government push for Shariat-Maderi with apprehension. The National Voice of Iran* noted that "the Coup d'etat regime was shamelessly attempting to turn his (Makim's) death into a victory for their dirty designs and appoint one of their stooges as his successor."

The strongest opposition to Shariat-Maderi comes from Iraq, the theological center for Shi'ite Islam, where ^{the} leading candidate for Pishva is Ayatollah Ruhalla KHOMEINI. Khomeini lived in Iran until 1965 when he was exiled to Istanbul for his opposition to the Shah's reform programs and the Government's interference in religious matters. He went from Istanbul to Iraq and has resided there ever since. Khomeini is not only a respected, learned Shi'ite divine, but also a polished speaker, politically astute and well-versed in Middle Eastern political machinations. His opposition to the Shah's rule is well-known, making him more attractive to the Iraqi Government but anathema to Iran. Although the selection of a new Pishva is on the surface strictly a religious matter, it assumes political importance because both Iran and Iraq have sizeable Shi'ite communities (48% of the Iraqi population), and the strained relations between the two countries are undoubtedly exacerbated by their respective maneuverings to influence the selection of a leader.

Khomeini has strong support among the bazaaris and Ulama in Tehran and his selection is also being encouraged by Iraq and the clandestine radios. His picture is being displayed in the bazaar and south Tehran and some Mullahs have begun reading the daily prayers in his name -- an honor reserved for the leader of the Shi'ites. ~~_____~~ reports of leaflets supporting Khomeini being smuggled from Iraq into Iran, and Radio Peyk-e-Iran has praised Khomeini for his "struggles" in support of "freedom, democracy and anti-imperialism." The growing support for Khomeini has met with strong opposition from the GOI. Mullahs who have publicly supported him have been detained by the security organization and have been warned to desist in their support.

It is becoming increasingly obvious, however, that any Ayatollah who does not have GOI support will not be able to assume the mantle of Pishva, at least for

*Clandestine Communist radio broadcasting from Baku.
 **Clandestine Communist radio broadcasting from Eastern Europe.

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the 27 million Shi'ites in Iran. A recent English language weekly published in Tehran noted that although political considerations should not affect the choice of a Pishva, it is obvious that since Iran is the center for world Shi'ism, no one could be chosen who did not have the support of the GOI. Khomeini was mentioned specifically as falling in the category of the non-acceptables.

Indications are that neither Shariat-Maderi nor Khonsari, because they have been tainted with the Government brush, will receive the necessary support among the Ulema to be chosen as the new Pishva. Although Khomeini probably has the greatest support among the Ulema, the opposition of the Government of Iran to his selection will probably preclude his being named Pishva. Since the possibility of finding a leader acceptable to both the Iraqi and Iranian governments is negligible, the post will probably remain vacant for the foreseeable future.

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